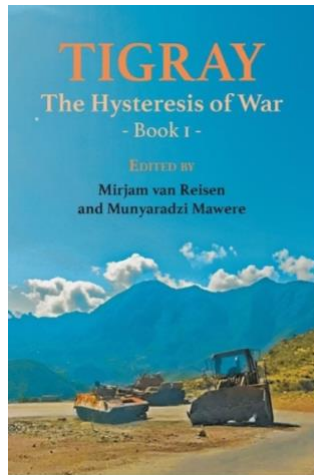


“Vultures were Circling the Areas”: Massacres During the Tigray War

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“Vultures were Circling the Areas”: Massacres During the Tigray War

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From an assembled people can a solution be revealed.

Abstract

This research employed ethnographic analysis to explore massacre patterns during the Tigray war, comparing secondary documentation with firsthand witness interviews. The study found strong corroboration between the sources and eyewitness accounts, revealing distressing details such as family killings, the restricting of burials, and the presence of vultures at massacre sites. According to the available secondary documentation and those interviewed for this research, the massacres during religious events in Aksum and Mariam Dengelat were primarily carried out by Eritrean soldiers, while Ethiopian soldiers were responsible for violence in Bora, and the Amhara Fano and Special Forces perpetrated atrocities in Setit Humera and Dansha. Eritrean soldiers used derogatory terms for Tigrayans and claimed they were ordered to execute extensive killings, while Ethiopian soldiers displayed hostility towards Tigrayans. Victims, including priests, faced violence based on their ethnicity and religious practices. The violence targeted men for execution, while women and girls suffered severe sexual violence, including gang rape and mutilation. Elderly individuals and children were forcibly deported, exemplifying ethnic cleansing. The coordinated violence against Tigrayans is viewed as an attempt to destroy the Tigray population, necessitating investigations for potential atrocity crimes and genocide under international law.

Key words: Tigray war, massacres, genocide, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Investigating massacres in ethnography

Massacres have occurred throughout history, but it is yet to be developed as a self-standing research discipline (Dwyer & Ryan, 2012), due to the complexity of the topic and how to treat it. Jacques Sémelin (2001b) discussed that massacres of civilian populations have received little attention for causes that are psychological, moral, and intellectual in nature:

The first is psychological in nature: avoiding a research topic that triggers horror and repulsion is understandable. The second is moral: faced with acts of pure savagery, how is it possible to prove “scientific neutrality”? The compassion felt for the victims leads spontaneously to the condemnation of their torturers. The third obstacle is more specifically of an intellectual nature: the phenomenon of massacre defies understanding. It appears to make no sense or to serve any purpose. We tend to write it off as man’s ‘folly’. Beyond such a psychological retraction, beyond our moral judgment, it is important, nonetheless, to understand the political, economic, and cultural circumstances that come together in the production of such collective behaviour (Sémelin, 2001b, p. 3).

Massacres – as an intentional attempt at the destruction of humankind – need to be examined from the perspective of the aim of the perpetrators, the action itself, as well as its effect on victims and survivors, and not only reporting the figures of those deceased.

Stathis Kalyvas described massacre as the killing of at least 10 people and its character including its sheer brutality and the inclusion of women, elders, and children, its enigmatic nature as well as its apparent irrationality (1999). The Guatemala Human Rights Commission, on the other hand, put the death of at least 3 individuals as amounting to a massacre (1989). Other researchers like Alain Corbin argued the killing of a single person may amount to a massacre (Corbin as cited in Sémelin, 2001b, p. 5).

Sémelin discussed that researching massacres is relevant to understanding conflict’s dynamic in addition to accountability inquiries.

Furthermore, far from being a ‘marginal’ or ‘collateral’ phenomenon, massacres may have considerable psychological and political effects upon the dynamic of a conflict. It is, therefore, legitimate to make it the object of separate study (Sémelin, 2001b, p. 4).

Sémelin (2001a) encourages approaching the study of massacres from an interpretative framework, with methodologies that allow an empirical and context-aware approach. These sources are one of the keys to imagining what might seem unimaginable, to bringing facts into the realm of understanding and out of the register of the ineffable, and thus helping to reduce the correlated barriers which, according to Sémelin (2001a), hinder the interest and progress of work on massacres.

This research investigates the massacres reported in the Tigray War. The war, which took place from 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023) to 3 November 2022, has been characterised by the brutal descriptions of massacres. The information on these massacres has been difficult to obtain and verify, due to a two-year siege and communication blockade imposed on the region (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024). Keeping Sémelin’s conclusion in mind, that ethnography on massacres should not be confused with the legal determination of these, this research employed a strictly phenomenological and interpretive ethnography of selected massacre incidents perpetrated during the Tigray war.

The research compares and corroborates available sources with ethnographic fieldwork on the ground. It investigates how the various sources triangulate in terms of the description of the *modus operandi* of the events, identified as massacres. The main research question is: *To what extent do the modus operandi of the events identified as massacres during the Tigray war triangulate between secondary sources and primary data collected in the field?*

Theoretical framework: Understanding massacres

The potential indexing of genocide and atrocity crimes through massacres makes research on this topic particularly sensitive, including delicate from a political point of view. This is also the case

in the Tigray war. The circumstance of a siege and total communication blackout allowed for the invisibility of the events and a contestation on whether these happened and how. Lyons (2019) has shown the political articulations and the power balance between accusations of genocide – as well as terrorism – in Ethiopia. Lyons (2019) finds that accusations of genocide are “a key arena of the larger contention”.

A relevant debate has, therefore, been ongoing on the scholarly engagement with research into massacres. Wierzbicka (1990) identifies the difficulty of defining what a massacre is in the lived reality, in the sense that a phenomenological description should precede the task of classifying it. Taylor (2008) on the other hand warns that a lack of definition opens the door to denial, minimisation and creates loopholes for the exactions committed, which is one of the core dynamics of groups who commit atrocities. A rational definition must therefore be pursued (Gewirtz, 1996), “as far as it will go” (Bollinger, 1992), in that the term ‘massacre’ has no consensual theoretical definition.

The vagueness of the definition contributes to a lack of interest in researching events usually described as ‘massacres’, creating a vicious cycle. There is little possibility of a widely held consensus on what constitutes a massacre, so varied are the circumstances in which they have occurred throughout history (Dwyer & Ryan, 2012, p. 5). The importance of this observation is in the sensitivity of the objective of the task in describing the event(s) identified as a ‘massacre’. On this point, it is worth consulting Jacques Sémelin’s decade-long work on the definitions of massacre in relation to genocide and their articulation. Although highly critical of the legal definition of genocide, Sémelin acknowledges its current normative power in this field of study (Sémelin, 2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2009; Guilaïne & Sémelin, 2016). As the term ‘massacre’ is not well established and lacks a strong and studied notion compared to the term ‘genocide’, which has a much larger legal and theoretical surface, a connection between massacres and genocide should not be *a priori* assumed (Sémelin, 2002a). This could be extended to an *a priori* assumption

of the connection between ‘massacres’ and atrocity crimes more broadly.

Several researchers ask for recognition of the importance of an ethnographic approach to the study of ‘massacres’, which is free from the strictly legal approach, required when determining atrocity crimes. Dwyer and Ryan (2012) emphasise that massacre studies aim to study massacres in their social and historical complexity, beyond the idea of the ‘technique of genocide’. This is important, as it separates the task of identifying the determination of genocide and atrocity crimes from the task of describing and classifying massacres in their lived experience.

While the need for clear demarcation from a legal perspective is understood, different things are at stake for ethnographers, whose task it is to describe events that are experienced or perceived as massacres. Ethnographers should start with the investigations of events that are referred to as ‘massacre’ by those who live in a conflict situation. Ethnographers should also seek to pursue the definitional contours of ‘as far as it will go’, but the contours here are established by the discourse they know to be contextual, relative and changing. It is then up to the jurists to see whether the discourse, once identified, corresponds with any legal classifications. Ethnographers must investigate the so-called massacre(s) as such, and understand the category as thought by the actors, while the jurists must then consider whether to categorise these in absolute terms. In short, the jurists seek to name events they have understood, ethnographers seek to understand events that others have named.

Contested discussions on the massacres in the Tigray war

In Ethiopia, accusations of genocide are widespread and have deep historical roots. Scholars such as Hassen (2022a, 2022b), Bulcha (2005), Dugassa (2008), and Jalata (2016) have accused the Amhara (or broadly Abasha) populations of committing genocide against the Oromo people. Similarly, Abbay (2022), Weldemichel (2022), and Desta (2022) argue that the Amhara committed genocide against the Tigrayans. On the other hand, scholars like Bitew Geremew (2023),

Atnafu (2018), and Wachiso Gichamo (2023) describe genocide against the Amhara by Tigrayans and other ethnic minorities.

Endalew, Molla, Hussien, and Bayeh (2022) specifically attribute the Maikadra massacre to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), framing it as a crucial event at the war's outset on November 3, 2020. Supporting this view, Bihonegn and Alemineu (2023) label the Maikadra massacre as a 'technique of genocide,' echoing the claims of Tesfaw Muluken (2016) in his book *Ye Tifat Zemen* ('The Era of Delinquency'), which portrays the Amhara as victims of a 'holocaust' orchestrated by the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

Bihonegn and Alemineu (2023) based their conclusions on interviews with 15 survivors from Maikadra, but only one referred to the events as 'genocide', which cannot be the basis for a conclusion that this was experienced as a genocide. This discrepancy highlights the need to distinguish between subjective experiences, the ethnographic and the legal definition of genocide.

Qualitative studies of the massacres perpetrated during the 2020–2022 war in Ethiopia all focus on the Maikadra massacre (9–10 November 2020) (Woldemariam and Woldgabreal, 2023). The studies of Eshetu (2022), Ali *et al.* (2022), as well as Antehunegn's thesis (2022) come from different disciplinary fields, offering a great diversity of approaches. Nevertheless, they share several points in common, the main one being that they always attribute – with or without analysis of the sources – the atrocities committed in Maikadra unilaterally to TPLF or TPLF-sympathising Tigrayans.

This conclusion runs against the findings of Ghent University (2024a) and the most recent joint reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2022). The latter presents a more complex reality, where the atrocities in Mai Kaidra in 2020 were committed by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Tigray Defence Forces sympathisers (IDF) and Amhara Special Forces (ASF).

On this point, the article by Ali *et al.* (2022) is the least informed, insofar as it relies mainly on official sources, notably to put forward the figure of 1,600 Amhara victims, which has not been confirmed by any independent observers. Antehunegn (2022), for his part, wrote

his thesis before the publication of the joint Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch report of April 2022. Antehunegn (2022), therefore, did not have access to the decisive elements needed to establish with certainty the multi-actor nature of the actions committed. Although published in June 2022, after the report's publication, Messele (2022) does not take the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International report (2022) into account either, nor do those by Bihonegn and Aleminew (2023) or Woldemariam and Woldgabreal (2023).

Researchers have a particular responsibility to be prudent, consistent, and clear in their approach toward the description of events, including massacres and the legal determination of genocide. This requires academic maturity, as the material speaks to emotive topics. Among the civilians killed in the war in Tigray, some were killed by aerial bombardment, drones, shelling, various crossfire situations and potentially chemical weapons (Brown & Kassa, 2021); others were shot at point blank, and eliminated by other gruesome methods (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024).

How to speak on these events needs consideration and a sense of humility. Ibreck and De Waal find that in a competing and ethnicised political environment, such as in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, academia should support domestic scholars to help “bolster” “fragile and divided scholarly communities” (Ibreck & De Waal, 2022). The phenomenological study of massacres requires humility and a notion that the imagination of it is inevitably incomplete. It also requires a separation of judgments forwarded from different fields. The ethnographer should not sit on the chair of the jurist. Njamnjoh tells us that the awareness of incompleteness tells us we need each other, and a sense of incompleteness provides the necessary medicine against villainising and scapegoating others and is good medicine against the spiralling effect of the creation of the idea of undesirable outsiders (Njamnjoh, 2021).

Methodology: A heuristic approach

This research takes a heuristic approach, examining some selected massacre incidents that were perpetrated between 2020 and 2022,

described as major massacres by victims, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) documenting the conflict, and international institutions. Triangulating the reports as compared to the insights from survivors and families of the victims, we will seek to examine the similarities and unique patterns of perpetration and modus operandi across different massacre sites as in Tigray as well as if this typology echoes genocidal-type behaviour.

There is a need to complement the phenomenological quantitative studies already carried out by the Geography Department of Ghent University (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021), notably via their www.ethiopiaticgraywar.com database, with a qualitative ethnographic study on the ground. Every Casualty Counts (of Ghent University) is an online database of massacres and civilian victims of the Tigray war (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021). The sources of information are verified social media posts, media reports, advocacy groups listings and direct reports (Vanden Bempt *et al.*, 2021).

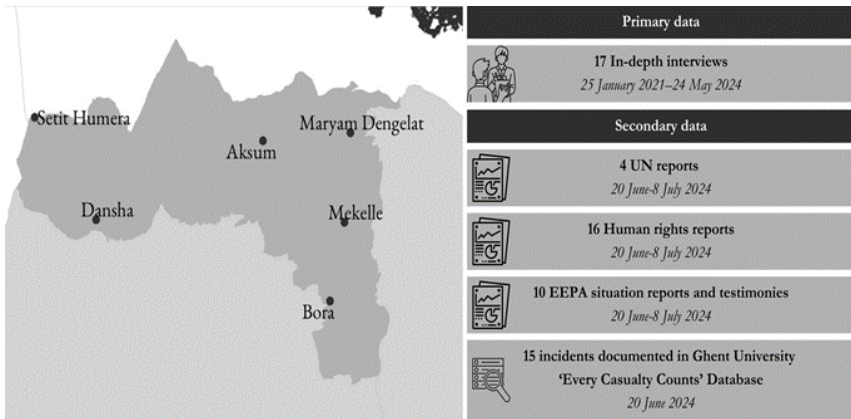


Figure 8.1. Method of data collection and interview locations

The research used qualitative data to explore the insights from the perspective of massacre survivors. The massacres selected for the qualitative analysis are those of Aksum, Dansha, Mariam Dengelat, Bora, and Setit Humera. They were chosen because of their importance in terms of the number of victims, as well as the critical mass of diverse and reliable sources concerning them, allowing a socio-historical study based on cross-referencing information and

avoiding cases of *unus testis*.¹ It should be remembered that the war in Tigray took place for the most part behind closed doors, in what Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits and Wirtz (2023) call a ‘digital black hole’, making the circulation of information and reliable sources particularly complicated,² even after the conflict’s end. This article makes no claim to exhaustiveness, which can only be achieved with further extensive fieldwork.

Secondary data sources

On the various incidents which are the subject of this study, several writings are already publicly available. In addition to the scientific articles already mentioned, we find the research results of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia and the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea, NGO specialised reports (by the international media, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Eritrea Focus, Europe External Programme with Africa [EEPA] and Ethiopian Human Rights Council), as well as articles and reports from the press.

¹ These cases must be treated in the same way as the others, but the epistemological challenges they pose require their own methodological questioning before they can be discussed in the context of a study such as the one we’re here conducting. Ginzburg, Carlo. 1992. ‘Unus Testis. Lo Sterminio Degli Ebrei e Il Pricipio Di Realtà’. *Quaderni Storici* 27 (80 (2)): 529–48.

² Reisen, Mirjam van, Mawere Munyaradzi, Klara Smits, and Morgane Wirtz (eds). 2023. *Enslaved: Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes*. Bamenda: Langaa.

Table 8.1. Types of data

Secondary data	Explanation
1. Every Casualty Counts	<p>The Geography Department of Ghent University regularly documented (www.ethiopiaticgraywar.com) the major massacre incidents perpetrated during the Tigray war from November 2020 to 20 December 2022. The researchers extracted 15 incidents for quantitative analysis (2024). The selection criteria were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="408 539 743 565">1. Civilian casualties, and<li data-bbox="408 569 922 595">2. Incidents with more than 10 casualties.
2. UN reports	<p>The four reports by the UN International Human Rights Commission on Ethiopia are among the valuable documents that were used to understand the context of the massacre in Tigray. The reports include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="408 848 931 909">1. Comprehensive investigative findings and legal determinations (2023b)<li data-bbox="408 913 945 973">2. The acute risk of further atrocity crimes in Ethiopia (2023b)<li data-bbox="408 977 953 1098">3. Human Rights Council Fifty-fourth session 11 September–6 October 2023 Agenda item 4: Human Rights situations that require the Council’s attention (United Nations, 2023a)<li data-bbox="408 1102 968 1220">4. Human Rights Council Fifty-first session 12 September–7 October 2022 Agenda item 4: Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention (United Nations, 2022)

Secondary data	Explanation
3. International reports by independent non-governmental organisations	<p>16 international reports of massacre incidents in Tigray reported by human rights advocates including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Crisis Group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ethiopia: “We will erase you from this land”: Crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia’s Western Tigray Zone (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 2022). 2. Ethiopia: The Massacre in Aksum (Amnesty International, 2021). 3. Evil days: 30 years of war and famine in Ethiopia. An Africa Watch Report (Human Rights Watch, 1991). 4. Ethiopia’s Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate (International Crisis Group, 2021). 5. Other summary updates and articles of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group.
4. EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa	<p>Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) is one of the institutions that was providing daily updates of the Tigray war context. The EEPA Team also published images of videos on massacres which were translated and transcribed. The images included witness statements. We used 10 Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa as part of this research.</p>

Primary data sources

Our research examined the massacre sites, perpetrators, intensity of the event, as well as the modus operandi of the massacres during the Tigray war. Interviews were conducted between 25 January 2021 and 2 December 2023 with 17 adult Tigrayan survivors of the massacres of Aksum, Dansha, Mariam Dengelat, Bora, Setit Humera, and Mekelle and 20 additional reports as well as 25 incidence updates were obtained from individuals who witnessed massacres.

Table 8.2. Data collection tools and participants

Data collection tool	Place and number of participants						
	<i>Aksum</i>	<i>Bora</i>	<i>Mariam Dengelat</i>	<i>Setit Humera</i>	<i>Dansha</i>	<i>Mekelle</i>	<i>Zagreb</i>
In-depth interview	5	2	4	1	2	2	1

The interviewees were selected through chain-referral sampling (or snowball sampling). Starting with the interviewers' contacts, which was the most appropriate selection method given the scarcity, difficulty of access, and vulnerability of the group targeted by this study, the research team identified the interviewees.

Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while some other were by phone calls of WhatsApp. All the interviewees were coded and labelled in an Excel spreadsheet. Participants in the interview were anonymised in the research.

The massacres were traumatic events for the interviewees, which left them vulnerable to varying extents. In order to respect their dignity and to create a climate of trust favouring discussion and the expression of emotions (Zarowsky, 2004), the interviews were conducted in Tigrinya language by interviewers who are native from Tigray.

Table 8.3. Coding and labelling of interview participants

Data collection tool	Date collected	Place	Mode	Code	Interviewer
In-depth interview	4-Jul-23	Bora	Face-to-face	EGIDI BS01	Tesfa
In-depth interview	4-Jul-23	Bora	Face-to-face	MDID IBS02	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	SAIDI AK03	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	MAIDI AK04	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	AHIDI AK05	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-Jan-21	Aksum	Face-to-face	HKIDI AK06	Tesfa
In-depth interview	7 Oct 201	Mekelle	Face-to-face	SMIDI 07	Tesfa
In-depth interview	2-Dec-23	Zagreb	Phone	SAMEI DI08	Gebremichael
In-depth interview	25 Jan 2021	Aksum	Face-to-face	TMIDI 09	Tesfa
In-depth interview	25-May-24	Mariam Dengelat	Whats App	HAGI DI10	Van Reisen
In-depth interview	28-Jul-22	Setit Humera	Face-to-face	BITID I11	Tesfa

Data collection tool	Date collected	Place	Mode	Code	Interviewer
In-depth interview	28-Jul-22	Dansha, Tsegede	Face-to-face	HIGID I12	Tesfa
In-depth interview	28-Jul-22	Dansha, Tsegede	Face-to-face	TSKID I13	Tesfa
In-depth interview	4 Jan 2024	Mariam Dengelat	Face-to-face	HREI DI14	Desta
In-depth interview	31 Dec 2023	Mariam Dengelat	Face-to-face	MFUI DI15	Desta
In-depth interview	7 Oct 2021	Mekelle	Face-to-face	SHGI DI16	Tesfa
In-depth interview	30 Nov 2023	Negash	Phone	TADSI DI17	Gebremichael

Interview HAGIDI10 resulted from conversations between researchers, which resulted in a voluntary recording of the experiences of fellow researchers who were present in the event. The semi-structured questionnaire focused on the survivors' personal account of the massacres, with an interest for the events and discourses that preceded and followed them.³

In addition to the recorded interviews, all the researchers collected material, narrative reports, videos and interactions with persons who had been present in the event. The material was obtained from the occurrence of the event, the immediate aftermath until the in-depth interviews carried out for this research. Interviewees were also invited

³ The method used is intended to be consistent with what has already been done for the Aksum article in the same book, so that the datasets are optimally compatible with each other.

to share photo, video or audio archives they may have taken during the events or their aftermath. These audio-visual sources, requiring of course ‘the effort of archaeology’ (Didi-Huberman, 2004), are particularly important, as they help to dispel, beyond the vagueness of concepts and the vagueness of factual events – already mentioned above – the vagueness of the imaginary.

Findings

The findings are described in three sections. The first section discusses the findings of the secondary material in the form of documentation available (at the time of the research). The second section discusses the interviews carried out (primary data). In the discussion, the analysis from the secondary data and the primary data is compared for the purpose of triangulation.

Secondary data

Based on data in available documentation in Ghent University, United Nations, international human rights organisations as well as EEPA, this section describes selected massacres.

Dansha massacre

Although it was the May Kadra massacre that received palpable media attention in the Western Zone of Tigray, the first massacre was perpetrated a week earlier in Dansha. The Danasha massacre took place at the beginning of the war. The Ghent University incident documentation indicated that the Dansha massacre, dated 4–6 November 2020, was perpetrated by Amhara Fano and militia claiming the lives of 24 civilians (Ghent University, 2024g). The massacre was not reported in the EEPA Situation Report, which only started its reporting on the 17 November. The Dansha massacre is among the incidents which were not reported in the media.

Aksum massacre

The Eritrean army killed civilians in a massacre searching house to house in Aksum from 28–30 November 2020 (Ghent University, 2024e; UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d; Amnesty International, 2021, EEPA, 2021a, b, c). All the documents explained the perpetrators were the EDF. A

witness of the Aksum massacre who recorded the events in a video which was transcribed, relates the events of the Aksum massacre as follows:

On the 27th November, 2020, Eritrean soldiers came on a Scania type big truck with Eritrean plate number (with red slash). And in the evening, they opened gunfire and there was gunshot the whole night; in response, Tigray militias and some youth of Aksum tried to defend but they could not hold out. On the 28 November, 2020, Eritrean soldiers entered the town and they were shooting and killing every youth they found in the street day and night including two brothers who were passing on the road to open their shops in the early morning of 29th of November. (EEPA, 2021b)

The witness reported shock that the holy place of Aksum was attacked in such a brutal massacre:

On the Eve of Hidar of Zion [Aksum Annual Festival celebrated on 30 November 2020], the compound of the St Mary of Zion Church was supposed to be full of people with no space to move. But today an era has changed and we were in gunfire for the whole week; during this festive day, St Mary of Zion church compound was empty, with no people, and what a ghost day. It is surprising that since the establishment of this church, even in the Derge regime, it has never been like this. (EEPA, 2021b)

The perpetrators of the massacre were identified as Eritrean soldiers, while ENDF soldiers present failed to protect the civilian population:

ENDF soldiers were in the town for more than a week but didn't do anything like that; however, Eritrean soldiers were killing Aksum youth the whole day on 29 November and the people of Aksum have never experienced this kind of sorrow on the eve of the St Mary of Zion festive occasion. (EEPA, 2021b)

Another testimony identified the images of a video in which several people are inspecting the body of a person killed in Aksum (during the massacre of 28–29 November). The following is a reading of what the video shows:

In this video, few people including a priest have been seen carrying a body (most likely found nearby the church of St Mary of Zion but no mention of a date) and they are trying to take the body away. The person recording the video was saying Aksum has experienced this terrible thing (expressing the degree of sorrow and sadness). Then

they lay the body down and one of them asked for ID of the victim; the priest found the ID in the pocket and he was found to be an employee of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia named G/hiwot G/kidan G/tinsae. After that the people were surprised; someone from them asked “why did he come and why did he go to this place (he did not mention exactly where the area was) and questioned his true identity.” Then someone from the group asks to see his face to cross-check his true identity and the person recording the video said “I know him” shortly after they saw his face, all agreed his ID matched. (EEPA, 2021c)

Ghent University estimated that between 100–800 people were killed at this one event (Ghent University, 2024e), EEPA described 750 had been killed at this massacre (EEPA, 2021a), while the report by Amnesty International (2021) indicated that it was unable to calculate the massacre’s precise death toll, but estimates that hundreds of people were killed.

The documentations of Ghent University (2024e), Amnesty International (2021c) and EEPA (2021a) similarly indicate that Eritrean soldiers were searching house to house massacring teenage and adult men on 28–29 November 2020. Amnesty International’s report on the Aksum massacre indicated that six civilians who were from the same family were among the victims of the massacre (Amnesty International, 2021b).

Prior to this massacre, Aksum was indiscriminately targeted through airstrike killing 19 civilians (Ghent University, 2024d), indiscriminate shelling that claimed the lives of 40 civilians (Ghent University, 2024c; EEPA, 2020).

After the massacres in 2020, there were frequent reports of extrajudicial killing of civilians in Aksum, one incident claimed the lives of 19 civilians on 28 November 2022 after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement (Ghent University, 2024f). The number of civilians killed in these four massacre incidents in Aksum is 878 people, according to the Every Casualty Counts database of Ghent University.

Dengelat massacre

The Ghent University’s documentation of massacres indicated that two massacres were committed in the St Mary of Zion Dengelat

Church and its surrounding localities of the Saesie Woreda⁴ in the Eastern Zone of Tigray in 2020 (Ghent University, 2024h; Ghent University, 2024i).

This massacre was committed by the EDF between 30 November and 2 December 2020 targeting the people who were gathered for St. Mary of Zion annual feast in the St Mary of Zion Dengelat Church (Ghent University, 2024h; UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d), after the villages had been surrounded by Eritrean troops. The incident report of Ghent University reads:

Soldiers opened fire on people celebrating in St Mary Dengelat Church. They later went door to door taking people away and executing them. Some of the victims were found with their hands tied behind their backs, shot in the head. (Ghent University, 2024h)

The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia also reported:

EDF forces killed large numbers of Tigrayan civilians around the Mariam Dengelat church, Saesie woreda [district] in the Eastern Zone. The area was busier than usual as many civilians had fled the fighting in the nearby Edaga Hamus, while others had travelled to the area to mark the feast of St Mary of Zion, which falls on 30 November. On the morning of 30 November, EDF soldiers approached the town and opened fire. They then went house to house, pulling out civilians, mainly men and boys, and shooting them. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts, 2023d, p. 22)

One of those whose son was killed interviewed by the commission stated:

We told them, 'All of us are civilians. Some are even university students.' They told us they didn't care. They said they had come from Eritrea and would kill every male over five years old. Then they separated the men and women, and ordered the women to tie the hands of the men behind their backs... They began beating us using sticks and guns. We were crying. Finally, we had to tie all the men. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts, 2023d, p. 22)

⁴ An administrative unit in Ethiopia equivalent to a district.

The documentation from Ghent University (Ghent University, 2024h) and the United Nations (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts, 2023d) establish that the Eritrean military perpetrated the massacre.

Bora massacre

The massacre in Bora took place from 8-10 January 2021. All reports subscribe the massacre to troops of the Ethiopian National Defence Force. The massacre occurred in the aftermath of the Ethiopian Christmas celebration. The report of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia described:

[On] 8 January, ...fighting broke out between Tigrayan militia and ENDF soldiers on the outskirts of the town. ENDF soldiers then entered the town on foot shooting indiscriminately before going house to house and pulling Tigrayan men and boys outside and shooting them. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d, p. 22)

The ENDF killed teenage and adult men searching house-to-house in Bora of the Southern Zone of Tigray (Ghent University, 2024j). The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia also indicated that the ENDF soldiers killed civilians searching house to house.

The report by Ghent University (2024j) indicated that between 70 and 170 men were killed by the ENDF while the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia indicated the number of those that were killed was 101 persons of which 100 were teenagers and men and one was a woman (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia 2023d).

The report by the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia found that:

ENDF soldiers did not allow families to bury their loved ones, and dead bodies were left on the streets of Bora for up to three days. One interviewee heard ENDF soldiers saying: "Junta deserves to be eaten by hyenas and foxes." It was only when the bodies started producing an intense smell, that ENDF soldiers allowed burials to take place. Interviewees explained that due to the sheer number of dead, there were not enough burial sites and residents had to bury the bodies in mass graves. (UN

International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d, p. 23)

Long-range indiscriminate shelling hit Bora on 29 March and 20 May 2021 killing 30 and 22 civilians in the respective massacres (Ghent University, 2024k; Ghent University, 2024l).

Setit Humera massacre

According to the report by the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, many Tigrayans who were living in Western Tigray were detained (mainly teenage boys and men) and deported (elders and women) through Tekeze River by Amhara Fano (United Nations, 2023d).

The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia's report reads:

Tigrayan civilians – women, men, and children were detained on a massive scale in Western Tigray. The Commission identified at least 13 different detention sites. Detentions began from November 2020 through September 2022. Many took place between July and November 2021 and were subsequently followed by forced expulsion from Western Tigray. Tigrayan civilians were detained by Amhara Special Forces and Fano militia, at times accompanied by ENDF and EDF soldiers, during mass roundups of Tigrayan civilians. Amhara Special Forces and Fano militia members would summon Tigrayans to meetings or order them from their houses. Others described being detained while displaced or fleeing their homes, or after being stopped on the street and forced to show their IDs which indicated Tigrayan ethnicity. (UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia, 2023d, p. 33)

Investigations by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2022) showed that the kebele/vicinity administrations in Humera made various announcements and meetings to cleanse Tigrayans from the zone. The report reads:

The ethnic cleansing campaign was announced in meetings in Humera. According to five residents, new kebele administrators held a string of public meetings in December 2020. Aklile, a 30-year-old Tigrayan farmer who lived there, described one such meeting: "I was trying to attend one of two times but it's uncomfortable, because they don't like us to participate with them in the meeting – especially the Amhara residents." He said that on December 14, he went to a general meeting held in the

kebele 1 administrative building: “They invited the residents – not specifically Amharas or Tigrayan. But the agenda was very dangerous because it was about Tigray and how we can move Tigray people out of the Zone beyond the Tekeze Bridge.” (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 2022, p. 73)

The report further indicates:

The new kebele 1 administrator, he said, made a speech announcing the administration’s decision to deport Tigrayans: They said: “We won against the EPRDF and the TPLF so Tigrayan people must not live with us, and they shouldn’t live here. If they want, they can go by themselves, if not we can also deport them. Also, nobody can go to Sudan, so we will close them in. “The agenda [of the meeting] was very dangerous because it was about Tigray and how we can move Tigray people out of the zone beyond the Tekeze bridge.” (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 2022, p. 73)

Tigrayan civilians living in Setit Humera town were rounded up and detained by the Amhara Special Force and Fano Militia. Between 1 and 3 March 2021, the Amhara Special Force or Fano Militia transported the civilians who had been rounded up to the Tekeze Bridge, executed them, and threw their bodies into the Tekeze River (Ghent University, 2024m). The incident report described the bodies thrown into the Tekeze River on 1-3 March 2021 were between 30 and 250 people.

Another massacre incident in Setit Humera reports the killing of between 5 and 50 Tigrayans between 16 and 24 July 2021 whose bodies were similarly found in the downstream villages of Sudan (Ghent University, 2024). The incident report reads:

Some of the bodies showed stab wounds or bullet wounds and some had their hands tied behind their back. According to the Ethiopian government, the claim of a massacre in Humera is false as the bodies might have been fighters killed on the battlefield in the Afar region. (Ghent University, 2024n)

Another massacre incident dated 4-8 August 2021 also documented:

Amhara militia were rounding up civilians and putting them in detention centers. People were killed after being taken out of the prisons. Bodies started washing up on the shores of a Sudanese village downstream of Humera. Some of the bodies showed

stab wounds or bullet wounds and some had their hands tied behind their back.
(Ghent University, 2024o)

In this incident, Amhara militia took 13–80 Tigrayans detained in Humera to the Tekeze Bridge, executed them, and threw their bodies into the river. Their bodies were found in Sudanese villages where they washed up on the riverbanks (Ghent University, 2024o).

The investigation by a CNN team uncovered that the bodies of those who were killed and thrown into the Tekeze River were found on the riverbanks. An excerpt from the news reads:

The ghostly outlines of limbs emerge through the mist along the Setit River in eastern Sudan. As the river's path narrows, the drifting bodies become wedged on the silty clay bank and their forms appear more clearly; men, women, teenagers, and even children. The marks of torture are easily visible on some, their arms held tightly behind their backs. On a trip to Wad El Hilou, a Sudanese town near the border with Ethiopia, a CNN team counted three bodies in one day. Witnesses and local authorities in Sudan confirmed that in the days after the team's departure, 11 more bodies arrived downstream. Evidence indicates the dead are Tigrayans. Witnesses on the ground say the bodies tell a dark story of mass detentions and mass executions across the border in Humera, a town in Ethiopia's Tigray region. CNN has spoken with dozens of witnesses collecting the bodies in Sudan, as well as international and local forensic experts and people trapped and hiding in Humera, to reveal what appears to be a new phase of ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia's war. (Elbagir et al., 2021)

The Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, and militia systematically targeted Tigrayans in the Western Zone of Tigray.

Video footage

A testimony by a priest of a group of people saved from being killed in a massacre was recorded on video. The names of the church and the district are withheld for security reasons. The authors managed the privacy aspects of the information and coded the church as E and the district as W for this analysis purpose.

Our church was shelled. The walls and the roofs were all shot. Now there are holes and cracks in the windows, walls and roof of the church. The shooting and shelling were done by Ethiopian National Defence [Force] soldiers from a distance before

they reached and entered the church. This was done on January 10, 2021, at around 3 PM.

The most horrifying time was on the next day. On January 11, 2021, the Ethiopian soldiers dragged us out of our home at 8 AM and took us to the church. We were around six and they forced us to open the church. We couldn't identify the key that opened the door. They get angry. They beat us. They asked us: where the Tigray policy forces, militias, and leaders are? They think the Tigray forces kept weapons in the church. They asked us: were the Juntas are? We told them we knew nothing. We told them we were servants of the church.

I am so sad I don't want to talk about it. They killed our brothers. I don't want to talk about it. What they have done to us is not something you could explain it in words. What they have done to us is nothing when I think of our brothers who got killed. They beat us. They start beating us from the church until we reach their bureau. They dug a pit and asked to stand in it. In the pit, they were about to shoot and kill us. One of the soldiers whose name was Captain Abdi, is the one he saved our life. He shielded us by standing between us and the shooters. He asked the shooters to leave us. Later he told us he is from Hawassa, Southern Ethiopia. The cruellest and who destroyed our life are the ethnic Ambara soldiers. There was the difference between the Ambara and Oromo soldiers. We identified them by their language. The ethnic Ambara's and Oromo's were speaking in their respective languages. We heard the Ambara's saying kill them all. Had it not been for Captain Abdi who saved our life, they would have killed and buried us all in the pit.

They released us at 5:30 PM and they took the church keys. The soldiers came back again the next morning on January 12, 2021, and interviewed us. On this day, they succeed in opening the church's door. They looted more than 10 [religious] umbrellas, and 5 carpets and took a heritage church book. The book was registered as a heritage at the Bureau of Tourism of Tigray. The umbrellas are heritage objects as well. They were not ordinary umbrellas. They were made nicely and didn't get dirt. They glare and their colour is unique like silver. The church is believed to be built in 424 BC. Our parents told us the book and umbrellas have been in the church for ages and generations. They are as old as the church. Our parents and grandparents said so. They were in the church from generation to generation. On the front page of the book, there is a statement about the person who built the church. His name is Gebre-Aregawi.

Our pain didn't end with the Ethiopian soldiers. The worst came when the Eritrean soldiers (Shabiya) arrived on January 26, 2021. They fought using the church as their main fortress and camp. We couldn't come to the church and pray for days. We pray for God to save us and give us peace. We pray for God to give his judgment to all who are doing all the crimes and bring them back to peace. (EEPA, 2021e)

Video footage was also investigated in an interview with a woman who lives and serves in a church. She explains how the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers abused her and the priests in the church. In the interview, she mentions a priest who was killed by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. She says the troops asked her to show them or give them information about 'juntas', a reference to the TPLF. She said she doesn't know and don't have information, they then tied her and kept her as prisoner in one of the church's room for three days. The troops beat her bitterly and they accused her that she buried dead bodies. In the video, she does not explain who these dead bodies are. She just shows the direction of where the dead bodies are buried. She said the troops beat and abused the priests and that they desecrated the church by smoking cigarettes in the church. (EEPA, 2021f)

Another massacre incident in Gueguna locality in Saesie Woreda of the Eastern Zone of Tigray stated that Eritrean troops of the EDF gathered a group of men to help loot the Goda Glass Factory where they were executed upon completion of the task (Ghent University, 2024i).

Primary data: Interview results

In the following section, the results of the interviews are provided.

Dansha massacre

A resident of Dansha town in Tsegede woreda who was a clothes merchant, farming sesame cash crops, and raising cattle was interviewed when living as an internally displaced person (IDP) in Mekelle. She said that the Dansha massacre was perpetrated by Amhara Fano and militia against 25 Tigrayan men between 4 and 6 November 2020 (HIGIDI12, face-to-face interview with Tesfa in Mekelle on 28 July 2022). The interviewee said:

The massacre in Dansha started that very first day on 4 November 2020. Amhara Fano and militia rounded the town searching Tigrayan men to kill. 25 Tigrayans

in our neighbourhoods were killed mainly using machetes, knives and some of them using guns. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The interviewee further indicated that the Amhara Fano were committing sexual violence against Tigrayan women ‘frequently’. This was taking place in her neighbourhood. The sexual violence was committed instead of killing them. She added:

We were frustrated when the Amhara Fano were searching Tigrayan men yelling ‘we are here to slaughter Tigre men so that we have the women for us to give birth to Amhara babies’. Together with my younger brother, 24, they killed 25 Tigrayan civilians. We were not even allowed to bury the bodies for many days. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The interviewee explained that the Amhara Fano collected all Tigrayan elders, women, and children to deport them through the bridge to the east of the Tekeze River while screening male teenagers and adult men for detention and execution. She said:

On 27 November 2020, Amhara Fano announced that all Tigrayan elders, women, and children must leave the town within a day otherwise they would be detained and massacred the same as the Tigrayan men. As many of the Tigrayans were gathered from where they were hiding, the Amhara Fano screened 98 teenagers and adult men from us and took them. Many of them who were taken were farmers, merchants, and even elementary and high school students. Then the rest of us were transported to the Tekeze Bridge with 15 buses the next day [on 28th November 2020]. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

She described the order they received from the Amhara Fano upon their arrival to Tekeze Bridge.

After we reached the bridge, one of the Amhara Fano who coordinated the deportation of Tigrayans said ‘it is south of the Tekeze Bridge where you belong. If you speak anything about what happened in Dansha, it means you decided for these men that we captured them to be killed very soon.’ (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

She travelled on foot from the Tekeze Bridge for weeks.

With my 10, 7, and 5-year-old children, we caught malaria for we had no resistance for we used to lack food while travelling on foot. On our way to Adi Mehammeday some farmers provided us with some flour that enabled me to save my family. We reached Mekelle on 12 June 2021. Now we sleep in a school turned into an IDP camp in the city. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

It is not only the whereabouts of those of her relatives who were detained when they were deported that concerned her. It is also looking at a bleak future:

On the one hand we have many family members that we have never heard from after they were detained by Amhara Fano. On the other hand, there is no clue for what the future will bring. You can think of my children who had enough milk and food, but now they are begging to continue their days, they were schooling, and now they are out of school for three consecutive years. This war took our past, present, and future. (HIGIDI12, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The interviewee indicated that the Amhara Fano and militia cleared Tigrayans from Dansha town detaining and executing the young and able-bodied men while deporting elders and women.

Aksum massacre

The interviewees indicated Eritrean soldiers entered Aksum following the fighting that continued until around 3:00 pm in the afternoon of the 28 November 2020, the Eritrean soldiers used tanks and shelling from the eastern direction. When they came into Aksum, they carried out house-to-house raids:

The soldiers then went down the city killing any men they saw which was followed by house-to-house raids and massive killings in captured groups between the afternoon of 28 and 29 November 2020. (MAIDI AK04, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021)

Many people were killed but how many were killed was not clear. Another respondent indicated:

It is when you are allowed to collect the bodies that we could have been able to know how many were killed. I am one of the survivors. At the time I was at home around Abinet. At around 3:45 pm, they blew open the door to our house. They collected

seven youths in our compound. They separated us from the women and elders in the compound ordering all men to kneel with our hands waving up. They immediately started shooting as they ensured we kneeled in line. I was shot in my right arm. Among those killed at that moment, two were siblings. They left me with the assumption that they killed me because they were firing non-stop guns after ordering us to kneel in a group. (AHIDIAK05, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021)

The Eritrean soldiers were especially targeting the men:

After the Eritrea[n] soldiers killed every youth and man they found searching house to house, they didn't allow us to take bodies into burial places. It was on the third day that we collected bodies. Even hyenas started eating the bodies of those who were shot in gorges and outskirts of the city. Vultures were circumnavigating the spaces around the outskirts hills for more than two weeks. (HKIDIAK06, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021)

The survivors of the Aksum massacre who were interviewed by one of the authors estimated the number of victims of the massacre between 1000 and 1200 (MAIDIAK04; SAIDIAK03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Aksum, 25 January 2021).

Dengelat massacre

The massacre at the St Mary of Zion church also happened during the Orthodox celebration of Zion on 29 and 30 November. All witnesses state that the massacre was carried out by Eritrean troops. An interviewee who survived the Dengelat massacre stated:

I was in the compound of the church of St Mary of Zion Dengelat while my wife and my relatives were inside the church attending a mass. My two children (6 and 4) were with their aunt and grandmother around the church outside of my site. Once I and my brother-in-law noticed soldiers were blocking the narrow gate of the village and supported by heavy gun trucks, I went to the inside church and informed the people that there was gunshot, and troops were coming to the village and screamed ... Go out go out. However, except few people most of them refused to go out including my wife. Normally, in the orthodox mass, even moving from place to place within the church is not allowed and it is an extreme violation of the ceremony if you try to stop the religious service. But many times, the mass was interrupted and stopped as the priests were nervous, suffering from fear while conducting the service. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

Explaining the context of the massacres, he added:

I and my brother-in-law already started running up to the top of the mountains to escape from the random bullets coming around the church and even we heard three bullets hitting the iron cover of the church. When we noticed we were somehow safe because we started going out, we hid ourselves under a rock looking down at the village of Dengelat. I witnessed troops from a distance going house to house bringing people outside and killing them in the backyard of their houses. I witnessed a group of 8 people killed where I knew their identity including a businessman from Adigrat who was hidden there with his family. He was killed along with his sister and his son, while his wife was with my wife inside the church and survived. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

The interviewee added:

I also witnessed that they were taking young men collectively to a big gorge locally known as "Endaba Gura" and couldn't see what they did to them while I later knew they had killed them all in one place (they were 39). After I watched most of the tragedy and the movement of the soldiers from house to house and the military trucks from a distance, I was getting panicked and nervous. I also saw two cars burning from those who were hidden and later I knew that one car belonged to the Ethiopian Road Authority (the driver who brought the car to Dengelat to hide survived) and a car owned by a relative (a priest who was later killed) and bajaj [a three-wheeled motor vehicle] owned by my cousin. At that moment we moved out a bit further, and the rock we had been hiding under, was crushed by a heavy long-distance gun. Then we hastily fled to higher ground, where I sustained an injury to my left leg by the relentless barrages of heavy weaponry. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

He survived the leg injury caused by the gun fire from the EDF's long-distance gun. His uncle and many other civilians who were in a religious feast were killed between 30 November and 2 December 2020. He said:

This, I think, is a systematic humiliation and a barbaric massacre of a kind that I have never imagined would appear somewhere in the 21st century. Many dead bodies were eaten by hyenas and other animals as the people were ordered not to go towards this direction. 24 young teenagers who were Sunday school members and sang for the church, were all killed. My uncle who was the iconic symbol of my mother's generation was brutally killed and he was not buried until after 5 days. There is a lot of pain

and memories behind every killing. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

The Eritrean soldiers said they were instructed to carry out the killing and that the instruction had been to be more severe than what they carried out. They were indicating that they were less brutal than what they were ordered to do. They also said they had been ordered to carry out a scorch-earth military strategy:

The Eritrean troops said, ‘We are not killing as we were told to do so, and it is only a quarter of what we have been ordered, and we were told we were ordered to even to cut the trees’. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

The interviewee further stated that the soldiers disallowed the community from collecting the bodies for burial. He stated:

Once they had killed 164 innocent lives including a newly married man with his sister and six priests, they ordered the village not to bury the dead bodies. After three and four days, they needed to take the cars and started allowing people to bury the dead bodies next to their houses and those around the car. Then they looted all the cars from the village, looted most houses, and carried out rape cases which were invisible. People were not allowed to cry and express condolence or move from house to house. (HAGIDI10, interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 25 May 2024)

Another interviewee witnessed:

The church’s walls were completely destroyed by the artillery shelling and bullets that struck its roof. The soldiers who had arrived at the church approached the individuals they had discovered there and addressed them as follows: ‘You are Weyane TPLF’; began shouting at the priests who were praying in the compound, the children who were seeking refuge at the church; and the elderly individuals who had besieged them ruthlessly before escorting them away. My brother-in-law and an elderly priest of the church were found dead in the wreckage caused by the shelling. (SAME003, interview with Gebremichael, phone, 3 December 2023)

A survivor of the St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre, who lost eight family members including her uncle with his two sons, said:

We went to Edaga Hamus on 28 November 2020 but since the city was getting hit by heavy weapons, we went back to St Mary of Zion Dengelat. At the Zion Mariam

day, the village was already under Eritrean troops. They came to a house in the church where there were about 20 people. They separated the girls and boys into two groups. They took the boys with them and they put us into one corner. We were asked to hand in all the gold that we wore including our ring. They tied the hands of all the men by their shoe laces and belts and they were on their knee. Then they start shooting them from the front. Then they moved us to a room and there were already dead bodies in the room and the Eritrean soldiers were called and informed by their fellow soldiers that there were even more to kill there. Before they left, they ordered us to leave quietly. I have lost 8 close relatives including my uncle with his 2 sons. (HREIDI14, interview with Desta, face-to-face, St Mary of Zion Dengelat, 4 January 2024)

Another survivor who collected and buried the bodies of 86 people after the massacre said:

I was in St Mary of Zion Dengelat church where more than 154 people lost their lives and I buried 86. I never thought I would experience such a terrifying moment in the 21st century. On November 20, 2020, we went to St Mary of Zion Dengelat to hide inside the church as the Eritrean troops were getting control of the small towns. We stayed inside the church for more than 12 days. On November 30, unexpectedly they started to kill everyone they saw and took people's property and cars. The church was a hidden place so I never thought the Eritrean troops would come there. We were ordered by the Eritrean troops to come down from the church and ordered to bury the bodies of the victims. I was fortunate enough to survive but that wasn't the case for everyone. (MFUIDI15, interview with Desta, face-to-face, St Mary of Zion Dengelat, 31 December 2023)

A medical doctor and researcher who lost his father on the 21st of November 2020 and his cousin in the St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre shared his painful story and the heinous crimes committed on civilians as follows:

A war burst in the town. Shaabia [Eritrean government troops] used our house as a shield. Father was one to two kilometres away when this happened. Shaabia burnt the animal feed he had gathered. So, he can't stay wherever he was, and run to the house to see and protect his family. A civilian and a 70-year-old dad were killed 20 meters away from his house. A formal funeral service didn't occur. They [mom and siblings] were not allowed to cry. I heard about this 25 days later; a relative travelled mostly on foot and some by car from Edaghamus-East Tigray to Mekelle (100km).

My cousin was killed on the day of the 'Dengelat massacre' in Edagabamus. On 30th November 2020, the Shaabia were killing everyone on their way in the villages surrounding Edagabamus by its south, west, and northern sides. The troops took a crew of young and middle-aged men to a new establishment of a 'ceramic' factory named 'Goda' by the northern exit from Edagabamus. The army ordered these young men to load cars with all equipment; then, these young men couldn't come back home. Elder citizens went to the commander to ask for the release of the innocent men. It was their everyday routine. The commander used to mock them like I will release them tonight and the like. That squad moved out; then people started to perceive the foul smell of a decaying body. (IDI 19, interview with a 38-year-old male, e-mail, 13 April 2023)⁵

The interviewees stated that the Eritrean soldiers said that they were sent for a mission of revenge and that they aimed to kill everyone that was above the age of seven.

Bora massacre

The Bora massacre was carried from 8–10 January 2021 after the Orthodox Christmas celebration. One interview was conducted in relation to the Bora massacre. The interviewee is a mother of six whose husband was killed in the massacre. She stated:

The ENDF used to camp in schools in Bora. The day after [Orthodox] Christmas [on 6 January], we heard gunfire in the outskirts of the town. Few moments later, the ENDF soldiers entered the town killing anyone they encountered. They immediately started searching house to house where they found my husband and me in our home. I begged them that there is no need to kill him as he is a civilian. They ordered him to kneel and shot him at his head in front of me. (EGIDIBS01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

She added:

Because the soldiers prohibited collecting bodies, my family had to cry inside for three nights to prevent the body from being eaten by the hyena. (EGIDIBS01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

⁵ This interview originates from the research of Medhanyie & Wunch (2024, and reused with their permission.

The interviewee indicated that around 200 civilian men in Bora were killed in Bora during the days after Christmas.

The interviewee stated that the massacre was perpetrated by the ENDF troops after the Christmas celebration and that house-to-house searches were carried out.

Setit Humera massacre

A detailed interview was carried out with a priest who used to serve one of the Orthodox churches in Humera was taking care of his family of five through selling garment products. He discussed:

As they entered Humera, Amhara Fano immediately started searching for Tigrayans house to house. Any Tigrayan boy or man found in his house or the street was taken to detention centres they prepared. The main way Amhara Fano used to identify Tigrayans was through checking IDs as well as using list of the community dwellers from kebele administrations. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

According to the priest the Amhara Fano, accompanied by Amhara Special Force as well as sometimes with ENDF used to round house to house at daily basis. He added:

Every day there were round-ups, detention, gunshots, and executions of Tigrayans. Terrified by the incidents, my children used to hide under bed and water tankers. At that time, if anyone reported your identity being Tigrayans, the default decision the Fano provides is either being shot on the spot or being detained. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

As these detentions were intensified, some concerned elders and religious leaders went to discuss their complaints with ENDF commanders around.

We went wearing religious dress and cross, from three churches in Humera, to beg them to enable civilians to live in the town where they were born. As we were trying to start the point of complaint that we came for, the commander stopped us immediately. He said 'You are shameless people. You support TPLF. Now we will see if TPLF will save you. This place is not yours. You Tigrayans are not ours either. You are not Ethiopian citizens. So I urge you to leave this compound before I order action to be taken on you.' We left the place immediately helpless to save our

lives. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

Heading the administration of the kebeles in the town, Amhara Fano continued:

Amhara Fano threw brochures signed by kebele administrators that gave three days and three hours ultimatum for Tigrayans to leave Humera. The brochure reads 'without thinking about your properties and your gold which is now ours, you must leave Humera within three days and three hours. Unless otherwise, we will kill every Tigrayans we find then after.' (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

The Priest indicated that the schools turned detention centres were full within a few weeks of these round-ups:

I remember Amhara Fano captured 170 Tigrayans within a day in the third week of February 2021. They used to round across kebeles with Isuzu cars to transport the detained Tigrayans to the detention centres. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

Amhara Fano ordered the Tigrayan religious leaders to hand over keys to the religious institutions in Humera.

Priests who came from Northern Gondar were already heading the religious rituals. In the church I served for 20 years in the town, the priest assigned from Northern Gondar prevented me from entering the compound uttering 'Tigrayans are all Satans, there is no Tigrayan priest.' As I tried to explain that I have been serving this church since its establishment, the priest called some Amhara Fano members who took me to a high school turned detention centre where I found about 400-450 Tigrayan boys and men being arrested. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

He added:

The Amhara Fano used to select from among the detainees, beat them on the floor, and throw them to Isuzu. But this was intensified in the last week of February and 1 March 2021. I remember more than 200-300 Tigrayan boys and men were taken out of the detainee centre. They were not returned then after. They were not that much interested in detaining the elders like me as I was 63. They were eager when it comes to Tigrayans in the age range of 14-50. On 2 March, they prepared two Isuzu, the one that transported us, elders, to be deported south of the Tekeze River while the

other the Tigrayan boys and men whom I witnessed being executed in mass around the Tekeze Bridge. As we reached the bridge, I saw bodies of people on the left and right sides of the road alongside of the Tekeze River. (BITIDI11, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, Mekelle, 28 July 2022)

Travelling on foot up to the Shire, he got the car to Mekelle where he used to shelter in a school turned IDP in the city. He lately learnt that those who were taken from the detention centre were executed and thrown to the Tekeze River.

Sexual-violence induced massacre

A mother of two who used to look after her father, in addition to raising her children, while selling traditionally prepared coffee in Edaga Hamus town of the Eastern Zone of Tigray, was interviewed for this study. She told how she met the same fate that put her father into a permanent disability. Her father was a merchant in Asmara before the broke out of the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war. Labelled as ‘agame’ her father was hit by Eritrean soldiers which caused him permanent disability and deported to Humera in 2000. After the 1998-2000 war it was her duty to feed and look after her father. She took him to Edaga Hamus.

After two decades, with the breakout of the Tigray war in 2020, she too fell in the hands of the Eritrean soldiers. In the last interview she had with one of the authors before she deceased, she said:

I used to live preparing and selling coffee in Edaga Hamus. Immediately as Eritrean soldiers occupied Edaga Hamus, five soldiers gang-raped me that made my life upside down. Because there was no access to medical services in Edaga Hamus, I made all the efforts to go and get medical support in Adigrat. When I came back from Adigrat three of the same soldiers captured me and gang-raped me again. As I got a rare option of escape from their daily gang-rape while being arrested, I decided to go out of Edaga Hamus with my ten-year-old son.

As a result, we started travelling from Edaga Hamus to Mekelle with our son and many other people through public transportation. Then Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers stopped the mini-bus. They also stopped the other three mini-buses after ours. We thought that they were going to have security check so that we prepared our ID when they stopped the mini-bus. But they ordered everyone to step out of the car and

to line up by men and women category. Then they gave us all injections by force and took us all to the forest where the soldiers used to camp.

I found myself in the middle of dead bodies of men and women, children, youth, and elders scattered underneath the forest of the big trees being tied and gang-raped via my va** and an**, when I was back to my consciousness. Most of those who raped me in the group were from the Bin Amir in Eritrea. They used to wear the Eritrean soldiers' uniforms as well as had scarps in their forehead. Some Ethiopian soldiers used to come three up to five to rape me when these Bin Amir were done raping me for the day. They raped me in this way for 10 days.

Not only that they killed my son before my eyes, seeing him while dying. It was better they should have killed me with him. I even begged them to kill me with him. They responded 'we want to see you agame suffer to death while we enjoy killing your son and we want to enjoy you as well'.

Among them, there was a woman who gave birth through caesarean section ten days later with her infant son. Although she told them that she was C/S they continued gang-raping her which led for her C/S to come loose and she died immediately. Two soldiers picked the infant child of her and collaborated to slaughter him. The Ethiopian soldier who slaughtered his right hand with knife said 'ጁንታ ኣይድግም': junta shouldn't ever be allowed to grow-up'. The Eritrean soldier who slaughtered his left leg uttered 'ኣዚ ዓጋመ ኣይዓብን ኣዩ' [Agame shouldn't be allowed to grow]. I couldn't ever forget that infant's suffering to death.

They used to chill drinking liquor before I was gang-raped and the odour of the dead bodies was very disturbing. The men who were abducted with us were killed and there were even bodies as we arrived there. The women, including me, were tied from behind for sexual purposes and our reproductive organ was intentionally made out of use. Many women died because they couldn't cope with the gang rapes and putting odd things in their reproductive organs. They burned my vagina using alcohol that made my womb out of use. I couldn't withstand the bleeding and pain that made me unconscious then after.

In the 11th day, I found myself in Adi Shundibin Health Center in Mekelle. I don't have any clue about who brought me there and what happened after the 9th day because I was on the brink of death for I was not able to withstand the gang rapes that were perpetrated by up to 20 soldiers some days. Then I was referred to Ayder Hospital where you found me today. But I couldn't get stability even in Ayder by then for the soldiers made various killing attempts for me intimidating my nurses to

direct them to me. I used to hide in the delivery rooms of the hospital as they frequented searching for me in the sexual violence-related treatment rooms.

Now I know these soldiers are not in Mekelle. But their intentions are being continued to be achieved for I couldn't get medicine to heal the bleeding in my womb and anus. They have succeeded that I couldn't give birth anymore. They have succeeded that I couldn't sleep memorizing the slaughter scenes they did in front of my eyes. I couldn't forget the last moments of my son while being killed.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments who sent these soldiers have now declared the total elimination of Tigrayans through siege and blockage. Mind you, I am gang-raped, my son was killed in my eyes, observed various atrocities while being raped, and now I am suffering for lack of medicine; these all made me tired of life. I always question what I am worth to be eager to live. I couldn't sleep at all and I don't see any mirage of the future too. (SHGIDI16, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 7 October 2021)

The woman who narrated her story on 7 October 2021 died in November 2021, after the interview.

Discussion

This chapter provided an ethnographic study of the massacres that took place during the Tigray war of 2020–2022. A heuristic approach was employed to understand what is meant by 'massacre' by the stakeholders in the conflict and to understand the events referred in this way. In-depth interviews were carried out on the ground, as an additional verification of reports on the massacres. Triangulation of the incident reports, the testimonies, and the interviews indicates consistency in terms of timelines, perpetrators and modus operandi. The events were all referred as massacres. The Tigrinya term ትምላቂ ጩናጫና (massacre), which was used in the interviews, has a similar meaning as it has in English.

According to Ghent University and the results of the interview, 24–25 people were killed by Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force in Dansha between 4 and 6 November 2020. The findings show Eritrean soldiers executed civilian boys and men in Aksum searching house to house between 28 and 30 November 2020. The number of people killed in the Aksum massacre varies across different sources

ranging from a general term of hundreds to 1,200 people. As crosschecked from different sources, the St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre was perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers against civilians who were gathered for religious purposes and continued to house to house killing of boys and men in Dengelat between 30 November and 2 December 2020. The number of deceased indicated across different sources range from 58 to 165 people. The Bora massacre was perpetrated by Ethiopian soldiers and claimed the lives of 101–200 people between 8 and 10 January 2021. According to sources, a range of 70–200 men and boys were killed being searched house to house. The Setit Humera massacre was perpetrated by Amhara Special Force and Amhara Fano claiming the lives of 30–300 people. The perpetrators used a unique modus operandi transporting Tigrayan boys and men from the town to Tekeze Bridge then executing them and throwing their body to Tekeze River.

Although events of massacres that are less documented and less prominent in the collective memory of a conflict, are nonetheless essential to understanding the general mechanics of the massacres (Foa, 2021), the massacres in small localities like the case of Dansha were not reported. This shows the effect of the communication blackout. There is a need for further on-spot ethnographic investigation of the massacres committed in small villages which are not yet disclosed for they can show the patterns of the massacre campaigns.

House-to-house searches for civilians was a modus operandi reported in three of the massacres. In the massacres young men were targeted, while women were targeted for sexual violence which was cruel and sadistic. The reason why people were massacred was reported because they were of Tigrayan identity. Relatives were not allowed to collect the bodies of their loved ones for three to five days after massacre incidents and bodies were thrown into rivers so that they could not be collected. Interviewees indicated that among those executed in massacres as many as 2–8 people of the same family were killed. The survivors are suffering from mental disorders and post-traumatic stress due to the cruelty of the violence.

While perpetrating the massacres, soldiers said things like: ‘you are Weyane TPLF’, ‘we are here to kill Tigrayan boys and men aged 7 and above’, ‘we are not killing as we were told to do so, and it is only a quarter of what we have ordered’ and ‘we have been ordered to cut the trees’, ‘junta shouldn’t ever be allowed to grow-up’, as well as ‘Agame shouldn’t be allowed to grow’. These justifications for the massacres indicate that these campaigns were the result of policies and the soldiers were instructed to execute the massacres in a coordinated and systematic manner aiming at the extermination of Tigrayans.

Table 8.4. Overview of massacres

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
<i>Dansha massacre</i>	Ghent University ‘Every Casualty Counts’	4–6 Nov 2020	Amhara Fano and Militia	24	Mass killing
	UN reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Interview Insights	4–6 Nov 2020	Amhara Fano and Amhara	25	Mass killing of Tigrayan

List of massacres	Source				
		Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
			Special Force		boys and men
<i>Aksum massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	28–30 Nov 2020	EDF	100–800	House-to-house mass execution
	UN reports	27–28 Nov 2020	EDF	Hundreds of civilians	Mass killing
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	28–29 Nov 2020	EDF	Hundreds of people	Systematic house-to-house searches, extrajudicially executing men and boys
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	28–30 Nov 2020	EDF	750–1,000	House-to-house mass execution of men and boys
	Interview Insights	28–30 Nov 2020	EDF	1,000–1,200	House-to-house mass execution of boys and men

List of massacres	Source				
		Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
<i>St Mary of Zion Dengelat massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	30 Nov –2 Dec 2020	EDF	70-164	Mass execution of civilians celebrating religious holiday
	UN reports	30 Nov –1 Dec 2020	EDF	165	House to house execution of men and boys
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	30 Nov –2 Dec 2020	EDF	List of names of 70 victims confirmed	Mass execution of civilians celebrating religious holiday
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	30 Nov 2020	EDF	EEPA confirmed the list of names of 58 victims	Mass execution of civilians celebrating religious holiday
	Interview Insights	30 Nov –2 Dec 2020	EDF	164	Mass execution of civilians celebrating

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
					religious holiday
<i>Bora massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	8–10 Jan 2021	ENDF	70–170	Execution of teenage and adult men searching house to house
	UN reports	8–10 January 2021	ENDF	101	House to house search of Tigrayan men and boys outside and shooting them
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	8–10 Jan 2021	ENDF	160	House to house execution of men and boys
	Interview Insights	8–10 Jan 2021	ENDF	Around 200 boys	House to house execution of

List of massacres	Source				
		Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
				and men	men and boys
<i>Setit Humera massacre</i>	Ghent University 'Every Casualty Counts'	1–3 Mar 2021	Amhara Special Force, Amhara Fano	30–250	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River
	UN reports	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports	N/A	Amhara Special Force and Amhara Fano	136 bodies had been found in the river between Hamda yet and Wad al-Hiliyu	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River
	EEPA Situation Report on the Horn	1–3 March 2021	Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force	More than 80 young men	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River

List of massacres	Source	Incident timeline	Perpetrators	Number of people killed	Modus operandi
	Interview Insights	1–3 2021	Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force	200- 300	Mass execution of men and boys then throwing their body to Tekeze River

The interviewees stated that artefacts symbolising Tigrayan culture, including religious and historical artefacts, were among the targets of destruction and looting, along with the killing of religious leaders and worshippers in the compounds of churches and mosques. Survivors experienced this as a deliberate attempt to undermine the Tigrayan identity.

Many survivors of the atrocities were prevented from receiving medical treatment, as they were abducted for weeks. Some survivors were abducted, gang raped and their family members killed in different settings as they tried to travel from town to town seeking medical support. Ethiopia’s policy of prolonged siege and blockage resulted in a lack of medicine and starvation, which aggravated the sufferings of the victims.

The following elements are important features of the Tigray massacres:

- The triangulation of different findings shows that the massacres in Aksum and St Mary of Zion Dengelat were perpetrated by EDF, the massacres in Setit Humera and Dansha were committed by Amhara Fano and militia, while the Bora massacre was perpetrated by ENDF.

- Most of the massacres were committed through house-to-house searches for Tigrayan boys and men as well as mass the execution of civilians gathered in religious institutions.
- Many of the survivors indicated that as many as eight people of the same family were killed in a day, leaving them without family or a support system.
- While massacres mainly focused on young men and boys, women and girls were subjected to grave sexual violence that included gang rape, abduction, inserting materials in their reproductive organs, and burning their reproductive organs so that they would not be able to give birth.
- The perpetrators used derogatory terms and hate speech, which explained how they aimed to exterminate the Tigrayan population while perpetrating these massacres
- The massacres were perpetrated under a siege, blockage, and limited humanitarian access, aggravating the effects of the massacres.
- The massacres were accompanied by a communication block-out and Internet shut down, and it was extremely difficult for survivors to ask for help and to communicate about the atrocities that were taking place.
- The survivors were not allowed to bury the dead for two to five days, which meant that they had to protect the bodies of their loved ones from being eaten by hyenas, further aggravating their suffering and leaving traumatic memories with the families of the deceased; in other cases, the bodies were thrown in the river and disappeared.
- The massacres appeared to target the Tigrayan civil population and were perceived as being aimed at exterminating the Tigray ethnic community.

The patterns identified by survivors and the families of the victims suggest government-sponsored massacres, as noted by Uekert (1995). The acts of violence carried out by Ethiopian forces constitute state-sponsored massacres. Both historical and contemporary examples demonstrate that such massacres are often perpetrated as acts of state

terror designed to instil fear in the population or to eliminate a specific group (Dwyer and Ryan, 2012).

The government of Ethiopia not only perpetrated massacres that targeted ethnic Tigrayans, but also invited or allowed Eritrea to perpetrate cruel mass killings. Eritrea's presence in Tigray was denied during the time that the massacres took place by both PM Abiy of Ethiopia and President Isayas of Eritrea. It seems that the siege and communication blockade was implemented to ensure the massacres could be perpetrated in secret. It allowed the perpetration of the massacres to remain unreported.

The pattern shows that the classification by Sémelin of massacres as bilateral massacres (such as in civil war) and unilateral massacres (such as that of a state against its people) (Sémelin, 2002a, p. 3) is inadequate to define the massacres perpetrated in Tigray. Eritrean soldiers expressed in clear terms the instructions they were operating under.

Further understanding of the drivers and consequences of the massacres in the Tigray war is necessary. The research suggest that many massacres committed during the Tigray war, have remained underreported. Further research on the specifics of the massacres perpetrated during the Tigray war is necessary to explain their intention. This may allow the possibility for accountability for the atrocities committed.

Conclusion

This research used ethnographic analysis to investigate massacre patterns during the Tigray conflict, comparing secondary documentation from sources like Ghent University and UN reports with primary data gathered from witness interviews. The study aimed to assess if the sources corroborated each other and to identify patterns in the methods of violence.

The result shows that the patterns of perpetration and modus operandi of the massacres in Aksum, Dansha, Mariam Dengelat, Bora, and Setit Humera triangulated positively across different document sources and the interviews. The results indicate a positive triangulation of perpetration patterns across the documented sources

and firsthand accounts. Interviews revealed harrowing details, including family killings, restricted burial practices, and the presence of vultures around victim sites. The interviews from the ground add vivid testimonies on the gravity of the crimes committed. Some massacres include the killing of 2–8 people of the same family. Families were not allowed to collect and bury the bodies of their relatives. Some interviewees indicated that vultures were circling the massacre sites, as the perpetrators were not allowed to collect bodies for 2–5 days.

The massacres committed during the religious celebrations in Aksum and Mariam Dengelat were characterised by the mass execution of Tigrayan civilians and the destruction of their religious and indigenous culture and identity. The massacres in Aksum and Mariam Dengelat were mainly perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers. The massacre in Bora was perpetrated by Ethiopian soldiers. Massacres in Setit Humera and Dansha were perpetrated by the Amhara Fano and Amhara Special Force.

The Eritrean soldiers used derogatory terms like, ‘Agame’. They stated that “Agame shouldn’t be allowed to grow”, explaining the mission they received from their leaders, and “we are not killing as we were told to do”, which is understood as meaning that they were instructed to commit massacres on a larger scale. Eritrean soldiers said: “and it is only a quarter of what we have been ordered”, which can be interpreted as a statement that they were holding back on instructions. Eritrean soldiers were also heard saying “we have been ordered to even to cut the trees”, meaning they were instructed to carry out a scorched earth military strategy.

The Ethiopian soldiers used terms like ‘junta’ and said “junta shouldn’t never be allowed to grow-up”. The Amhara Fano used administrative documents, including the list of residents in kebeles and identity documents in Western Zone of Tigray to profile and target ethnic Tigrayans stating: “we are here to slaughter Tigray men so that we have the women for us to give birth to Amhara babies”. An ENDF leader responded to priests in Setit Humera by saying: “you are shameless people. You support TPLF. Now we will see if TPLF will save you. This place is not yours. You Tigrayans are not

ours either. You are not Ethiopian citizens. So I urge you to leave this compound before I order action to be taken on you”. Tigrayan priests in Setit Humera were prohibited from carrying out religious services in a church. A priest who came from the neighbouring Amhara region in Northern Gondar to serve the church said “Tigrayans are all Satans, there is no Tigrayan priest”.

The massacres were marked by face-to-face killings, with a focus on male targets and severe sexual violence against women, including gang rape and mutilation. Children and the elderly were forcibly deported, indicating ethnic cleansing. With regards to the massacres in Setit Humera and Dansha, elders and children were deported from these sites.

The coordinated killing of ethnic Tigrayans through the mass execution of men, while damaging the reproductive organs of women and girls, as well as deportation of elderly people and children, appear to be a concerted attack aimed at destroying the Tigray people. This warrants further investigation into potential atrocity crimes and to ascertain if genocide was committed under international law.

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Authors' contributions

Daniel Tesfa and Matteo Bächtold set up the first version of this chapter. This work has been carried out as part of his PhD study. Matteo Bächtold provided the theoretical considerations for this chapter, particularly the introduction, the theoretical section and the section on research approach. Daniel Tesfa and Rufael Tesfay Gebremichael collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Daniel Tesfa carried out the second review of the coding labelling of the EEPA Situation Report and all other secondary sources, as well as primary material. Daniel Tesfa was responsible for the coordination of all subsequent versions of the chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach of the chapter, reviewed all of the versions in detail, and restructured the text.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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